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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study was made to investigate factors possibly related to adoptive families' and adoptive single parents' decisions about participation in a new postplacement support service. Factors under consideration included family background, existing informal supports, attitudes toward mental health professionals, and perceptions of the specific postplacement service. The service under investigation was an adoption bonding program, a variant of family therapy designed to help the family adopting an older child readjust as a new system and build new relationships. Each adopting family was administered an interview schedule and questionnaires were developed specifically for the study. Each question investigated one of three dimensions: (1) availability and use of supports, (2) perceptions about childrearing and mental health, and (3) perceptions about the bonding program. Several factors were found to be related to participation in the service program, including ethnicity, marital status, availability of supports, and impressions of the program assessed. It was concluded that findings suggest the importance of considering such factors in the design and implementation of postadoptive placement supports. (RH)

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Older Child Adoptions and Families' Participation in Post-placement Supports

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Older Child Adoptions and Family Participation in Post-Placement Supports

Abstract

Because they are at risk for failure, adoptive placements of older children should be supported by post-placement support services. The provision of these services can be enhanced by knowledge of what factors are related to families' decisions about participation in post-placement services. In this study, 18 families who were referred to a post-placement support service were interviewed and completed a questionnaire about factors related to their decisions about participation in the service. Several factors were so related including ethnicity, marital status, the availability of supports, and impressions of the program assessed. These findings suggest the importance of considering such factors in the design and implementation of post-adoptive placement supports.

Older Child Adoptions and Families' Participation in Post-placement Supports

The focus in adoption practice has shifted during the past 20 years from placing infants in good homes to finding appropriate homes for older children. This has resulted largely from the decreasing availability of infants for adoption and the corresponding increase of older children waiting for permanent homes. In 1977, of the 108,000 children legally available for adoption, 40% were 11 years and older. Of the 40,000 adoptees placed in adoptive homes and receiving social services that year, 64% were over age four, as compared to 36% in 1961 (Shyne & Schroeder, 1978).

Because older children have had at least one traumatic loss, adoptive placements for older children are considered risky (Bellucci, 1975; Gill, 1978). Older children comprise a large sample of the "hard to place" children for whom adoption workers cite informal estimates of 33% failure (Cowles, Note 1). Effective post-placement supports, services provided to facilitate the adjustment of adoptive families (e.g., periodic home visits, parent and adoptee groups), are critical to the success of adoptive placements. What are effective post-placement services? Although there is little empirical knowledge about which post-placement support services are effective, what evidence we have from the casework literature suggests that these supports indeed are helpful

(Gill, 1975; Katz, 1977; Ward, 1981). A second, and perhaps more important question is what factors are related to adoptive families' use of post-placement support services. As empirical knowledge about the factors related to families' use of or participation in post-placement services is gained, the provision of these services can be enhanced.

This was an exploratory study to investigate what factors were related to adoptive families' and adoptive single parents' decisions about participation in a new post-placement support service. Factors under consideration included families' backgrounds (i.e., demographic characteristics), existing informal supports (e.g., family, friends, clergy), attitudes toward mental health professionals, and perceptions of the specific post-placement service.

The service under investigation was an adoption bonding program, a variant of family therapy, designed to help the family who adopts an older child readjust as a new system and build new relationships. This program was designed in 1980 by the mental health staff of a residential treatment center to enhance placements made by its affiliate adoption agency. With an experiential and educational focus, bonding sessions usually start the second week into the adoptive placement and continue weekly to ten sessions or the completion of the contracted number of sessions. A bonding session typically starts with a family oriented task or game, followed by a discussion of current successes and failures in the family's process of adjustment. Participation in this program is voluntary.

METHOD

Subjects. Adoptive families who were referred to the adoption bonding program worked with an agency in a large midwestern city which specializes in hard to place adoptions. Twenty-two families were referred to this program between its inception in November, 1980 and the start of the study in June, 1982. These were families, couples or single adults who adopted a child over age 5 with neither a physical handicap nor severe retardation. Introductory letters and follow-up phone contacts yielded 18 families (82% of population) willing to participate in the study.[1] Sample characteristics:

- marital status - 44% of parents were married, 56% were single.
- number of children - 39% of families had 1 child, 22% had 2 children, and 39% had 3 or more children.
- ethnicity - 56% of families were black, 44% were white.
- socioeconomic status - 56% working class, 44% middle class.
- age of child at placement - 6% of the adoptees were 4 years, 44% 7-9 years, 33% were 10-12 years, and 17% were 13-15 years of age.

Measures. Each adopting family was administered an interview schedule and questionnaire which were developed specifically for this study. Designed as complementary measures, the interview schedule was comprised of 14 questions and the questionnaire included 10 questions. The interview was open-ended. Items on the

questionnaire were to be rated on a 6 point Likert-type scale. Each question on the interview schedule and questionnaire was designed to investigate one of three dimensions: 1) availability and use of supports (e.g., If things went badly at home, who are the people you could turn to for real comfort and support?); 2) perceptions about childrearing and mental health (e.g., Parents who raise their own children really know about their own children. Experts on the other hand, really know quite a bit about children, too. Please rate - from 1-parents know most to 6-experts know most - who you feel knows most about children); 3) perceptions about the bonding program (What sounded good about the bonding program? What sounded bad about the program?).

Procedure. Families consenting to be interviewed were seen at home. Both families who had participated (n-11) and those who chose not to participate (n=7) in the bonding program were interviewed. All ten single parents were interviewed alone; six of the adoptive couples were interviewed together. Of the remaining two couples only the adoptive mother was interviewed. In three cases, the adoptee was present at the request of the parents. Administration of the questionnaire immediately followed the termination of the interview. The average duration of these visits was 50 minutes.

RESULTS

This exploratory study has yielded largely descriptive data. Results do suggest several identifiable factors may be related to

families' participation in the bonding program. The criterion for participation was attendance at a minimum of three sessions. Sixty-one percent of the families chose to participate while 39% of the families did not participate.

1) Demographics. Seventy-five percent of white families participated while only 50% of black families participated. Seventy percent of single parent families and only 50% of two parent families chose to participate.

2) Availability and use of supports. Seventy-two percent of non-participants and only 18% of participants had both immediate and extended family living in the same city. Analysis of this difference by Fisher's one-tailed Exact Probabilities test was significant ($P < .05$). Twenty-seven percent of participants felt they had no one to whom to turn for help when things were going badly at home, while no non-participating family reported this problem.

3) Perceptions of bonding program. Families' negative anticipations of the program and suggestions for when bonding should start were analyzed using a one-way repeated measures ANOVA with participation as the independent variable. These analyses revealed differences which approached significance. Families who did not participate tended to have more negative anticipations ($\bar{X}=2.86$) than did participating families ($\bar{X}=1.82$, $F(1, 16) = 4.00$, $p = .06$).

Analysis of suggestions for when bonding should begin revealed that participating families suggested that bonding start before or at placement ($\bar{X}$=2.00) while non-participating families suggested bonding start after placement ($\bar{X}$=3.00; $F(1,16) = 3.42$, $p = .08$).

INSERT TABLES 1 and 2 HERE

4) Other findings. Current status of adoptive placement was related to participation. Of those families which were intact (i.e., adoptee still living in the home; n=13), 69% had participated in bonding while 60% of the disrupted families (n=5) had not. When asked about what type of help was needed for the adoptee, 86% of the non- participants wanted psychotherapy while only 36% of participants expressed the same need.

DISCUSSION

This study has identified several factors which are related to adoptive families' participation in post-placement supports. Families reporting fewer actual supports and perceving fewer supports were more likely to participate in the bonding program. It may be that this post-placement support fulfilled a need for support which was not met elsewhere. In addition, the participation of fewer black families and more single parents than white and two parent families may be related to differences in availability or use of supports for families. Black families in this study did tend to have more family available than did white families (50% blacks and

only 20% whites had both immediate and extended family living in the same city). Previous research has shown that single parents do use familial supports less frequently than do couples (Feigelman & Silverman, 1977).

These findings on existing suports are particularly important in light of current trends in family mobility. Packard (1972) has noted that as a result of increasing relocations, families lose family and friends as supports. Other research suggests that a large network provides not only more support, but also more stress (Belle, 1982). As a consistent thread in these works, existing supports emerges as a factor which warrants further research.

Perceptions of the specific program may have been important in families' decisions about participation. Families who felt the program offered someone who could provide help were more likely to participate. In addition, those families tended to want the bonding service offered earlier in the adoptive placement than did non-participating families. Other factors apparently related to participation included current status of placement and current needs of adoptive families. Those who tended to have more disruptions and to need therapy had not participated. While a casual relationship can not be inferred, these latter findings suggest the importance of this post-placement support in facilitating family adjustment.

Due to the size of the population from which the sample is drawn, generalizations from this research are limited. However, this study is one of the first to systematically examine and thus generate empirical knowledge about adoptive families' participation in post-placement supports. Specifically, these findings suggest that certain family characteristics, the availability and use of supports, and families' perceptions of specific agency programming may be important factors in families' use of post-adoptive placement supports. Consideration of these factors in the design and implementation of post-placement supports can enhance the provision of such supports. However, needed first are replication studies with larger samples to establish these factors as deserving consideration in the design and implementation of effective post-placement services.

TABLE 1

ANOVA of Negative Anticipations

	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Probability
Group	4.62	1	4.62	4.00	.06
Error	18.49	16	1.16		

TABLE 2

ANOVA of Bonding Suggestions

	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Probability
Group	4.28	1	4.28	3.42	.08
Error	20.00	16	1.25		

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FOOTNOTE

1. Of the remaining four families, one was in the midst of a disruption and not accessible, one declined to participate, and two families could not be contacted.